

How the U.S. Will Get POWs Home

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Sometime before February 11, U.S. medical evacuation planes will land at Hanoi's Gia Lam airport to pick up the first group of released U.S. prisoners of war and start them on their long-awaited trip home.

As this first contingent prepares to leave Hanoi — some of them after eight years of confinement — another group of Americans is moving toward the north. These are aboard a small Navy force of ships and helicopters getting ready to sweep hundreds of active mines from North Vietnam's harbors and waterways.

Both actions will mark the first instances of large-scale peaceful cooperation between Hanoi and Washington in almost 20 years.

RELEASES

The prisoners, according to President Nixon's chief peace negotiator, Henry A. Kissinger, will be released to American authorities — not to private groups — and medical teams in Hanoi at roughly 15-day or two-week intervals after a formal peace agreement is signed Saturday in Paris.

Kissinger, at a packed news conference yesterday, said the 15-day interval is the maximum amount of time.

"It could be faster," he said, raising the possibility

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that the beginning of one of the most dramatic episodes in the long and costly war may get under way sooner.

All the POWs will be released within 60 days of Saturday's signing. During the same 60-day period the remaining 23,000 American troops in South Vietnam are to be withdrawn.

LIST

On Saturday, the U.S. will also receive its first official

list of all Americans held captive by the Communists throughout Indochina.

New Pentagon figures through January 20 list 591 Americans as captured in Indochina — 476 in North Vietnam, 109 in South Vietnam and six in Laos.

North Vietnam unofficially has acknowledged about 387 men in captivity in the north, but it was said here that the official list on Saturday will not differ by more than 30 to 50 men from the U.S. version.

Kissinger said no Americans are held in Cambodia, and that except for those held in the southern part of South Vietnam, all other prisoners — including those in Laos — will be released in Hanoi. The ones in the south will be released to American authorities at designated points, he said.

PRIORITY

Under the protocol covering the return of captured military personnel and American or foreign civilians "persons who are seriously ill, wounded or maimed, old persons and women shall be returned

first. The remainder shall be returned either by returning all from one detention place after another or in order of their dates of capture, beginning with those who have been held the longest."

The Pentagon lists 1334 men missing throughout Indochina.

Many of these undoubtedly will never be heard from again. But some may well come out of the jungles.

At Hanoi, the men will receive a quick medical check from the doctors and nurses aboard the U.S. planes.

Kissinger said they may then be flown "to places of our own choice, probably Vientiane" in Laos. It was not clear why this would be done, rather than taking the men directly to Clark Field in the Philippines which is the first major processing center for their return to the

U.S.

PLANES

The planes for the medical airlift will be specially equipped four-engine Air Force C-141 jets.

The return of American POWs and civilians in captivity is unconditional and is not linked in the agreement to the separate question of the eventual release of captured Vietnamese civilians on both sides.

When the returning war prisoners reach Clark Field, they will get more intensive physical checkups, be brought up to date on what's happened during their captivity in both world affairs and in their personal family matters, get new uniforms, back pay accounting, and a telephone call to home.

From Clark, the big C-141 jets will fly them to Travis Air Force Base in California, and from there to whichever one of 31 local military hospitals is close to their homes.

REUNIONS

It is at these local hospitals that the family reunions will take place.

The tone of the Pentagon's elaborate "Project Homecoming" however, is low-key, designed not for fanfare but to ease these men — many of whom may have physical or emotional scars — back into their former life patterns as easily as possible.

The removal, deactivation or destruction of the mines is also called for in a special protocol — to be signed Saturday in Paris.

Where removal or destruction is not possible, the agreement provides that the remaining mines be deactivated and their positions clearly marked.

CARRIER

To carry out this task, the Navy is moving a helicopter carrier, believed the Inchon, and some minesweepers toward the North.

About a dozen specially equipped helicopters from the carrier are expected to carry out the bulk of the mine deactivation.

The helicopters tow spe-

cial devices in the water which send out magnetic or noise pulses similar to those that a ship's hull or propellers would give off and this explodes the mines which lie on or near the bottom of harbor channels and just off shore.

Navy carrier planes have dropped perhaps thousands of mines since last May, but the number left active is said to be in the hundreds. The deactivating operation is expected to take the better part of two months.

SWEEPERS

Minesweepers will be used for some tight spots the helicopters may not be able to turn into and possibly to help clear some inland waterways.

The minesweeping operation is supposed to start at 7 p.m. EST Saturday, but there is some prospect that the actual sweeping may come later because the protocol also calls for the U.S. to provide its plan to the North Vietnamese as well as "maps of the mine-fields and information concerning the types, numbers and properties of the mines."

The protocol also allows North Vietnam to participate in the mine clearance "to the full extent of its capabilities."